

# Write Right for a Job

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*By Gabriel A. J. Yardley*

Increasing numbers of multinational companies do much of their hiring locally, and many require prospective candidates to submit a résumé or curriculum vitae (CV) in both the local language and English. The activity described in this article was developed to introduce university students in their sophomore year majoring in British and American Studies to develop an understanding of the processes involved in writing a résumé. The variety of styles and approaches suggested by several popular writing texts can be confusing for the instructor and student, and thus the intention is to provide an alternative and entertaining approach to résumé writing for both learner and instructor which goes beyond a prosaic collation of bland exercises and stylistic techniques to be understood and mastered before the next class.

## Procedure

1. The students were first familiarized with the conventions of writing a résumé and introduced to different examples of these and the types of information that they might wish to include. Given the number of alternative formats available, it was suggested that in writing a CV they should adopt one particular format based on either Brown and Hood, or Horner et al. (Footnote 1 below)

## Activity 1

The students were presented with the following adaptation of an advertisement from the *Japan Times* requesting applications for the position of female vocalist at a restaurant in downtown Tokyo (See Figure 1.)

They were then asked to invent an appropriate background which would secure them the position, and to order relevant details concisely, correctly, and imaginatively under the sections with the following headings: Personal; Education; Other Qualifications and Awards; Employment; Interests and Activities; and References. Not only would an alias allow for later impartiality in selecting a short-list of candidates, but by being 25 years old, all the learners were old enough to have developed some useful and interesting work experience. All learners had access to word-processors or computers, hence the formatting specifications given in Figure 5 and elsewhere.

Everyone was also asked to take heed of the following guidelines in Figure 2 in preparing their CV. The class was then asked to spend a 10-minute period of free-writing, jotting down ideas about their supposed alter egos and their newly-to-be-invented educational and working

backgrounds. These may be written down in the table provided in Figure 3, thus focusing the learners' attention on the task in hand.

## **Oral Work**

Learners were then asked to discuss in pairs what they had so far managed to conjure up, and each time an item from their list was discussed, they were asked to preface their comments with a clause-initial discourse marker from the list in Figure 4. This task lasted for 10 minutes.

Many University and College EFL students are acquainted with a large variety of transitions or discourse markers and can recall their syntactic features in detail. A number of textbooks present such transitions in lists or boxes, but apart from the usual cloze-type exercise to test their use, the learner is not specifically encouraged to internalise their use. Transitions need to be used actively as part of every-day speech. What learners do not speak they will not write. Thus, the incorporating of discourse markers through oral activities can greatly improve elegance and fluency in conversation, and consequently in writing. Talking in a writing class can be a novel idea for many students, and my seemingly ridiculous demands that they introduce all their utterances with a transition from the list was successful in eliciting an exaggerated enthusiasm for using one of the items every time anything was said about their CV. The class were again reminded that their ideas would form the basis for creating a CV in order to apply for the post as advertised, and that success in obtaining the post would depend not only on how imaginatively they could present themselves as suitable candidates, but also on how closely they followed the organisational style as provided by the résumé format that they had decided to follow.

As an added incentive, the class may be told that the writer of the best and most imaginative CV will receive a book token for \$10 which must be spent on an EFL book! It was also emphasised that the class not the instructor would decide on the best CV.

This period of discussion in pairs was also useful in that learners were able to exchange ideas and gain inspiration from their partners about information to be included in the CV.

## **First Impressions**

A copy of the first draft was turned in the day before the following writing class for revising and comments, all of which were made on a grade-sheet as provided in the Appendix (adapted from Cummings and Genzel). Another copy of the CV had also been passed on to the partner with whom the first ideas had been discussed, and they too were asked to fill out an identical grading sheet before the next class.

In the majority of cases this first of three drafts included the minimally informative and superficial material subsumed under the various headings. Under Education, for example ("I attended Pennsylvania State University"), many were vague, often providing little detail or depth regarding what was actually studied (I graduated in Music), whereas some were over-informative

("I achieved Grade 1 in Abacus"), and even gave details of primary school chores ("classroom cleaner").

In their *Interests* and *Activities*, many also thought it important to mention that "I am a good cooker." As all the résumés were produced on computers, a number of unforced errors or typos occurred, with a significant number proclaiming their *Martial* (!) Status as being "Unmarried." Some also forgot that they were meant to be 25 years old (and female) thus having gained some imaginary work experience, while others presented a hybrid résumé in a confused combination of styles, blending *Interests* with *Other Awards* and *Achievements*. While the layout of most of the résumés followed an acceptable model, the selecting and detailing of relevant information was the element that most needed improving.

Photocopies of the best final résumés from the previous year were circulated so that those who were not sure how much to add to their résumé beyond inventing a new name, would have a clearer idea of what was expected of them. A 10-minute discussion activity between partners highlighted peer revisions and recommendations, as well as those from the instructor's grade sheet, with *all* comments again being prefaced by a transition from the list in Figure 4. Partners then also had to tell each other how they were going to improve their résumés. For homework, a second draft was to be prepared, and in addition, a covering letter in their new name, was to accompany the résumé.

## Follow Up

As with their first assignment, a copy of the revised CV was also given to a partner on the day before class and thus comments and revisions were prepared by both the instructor and the partner. These new CVs produced applicants with astonishingly diverse careers. One had studied at "St. Larry's Music School" in Manhattan; one was a singer at the "Hard Stones Café" in Tokyo; and another had won the first prize at the "1988 International University Karaoke Contest" in Vienna. Someone calling himself Amy White even referred to being voted "Most Incredibly Good Singer" in 1992, while yet another had studied at the prestigious Juilliard School. Applicants for the job included Ingrid Bergman, Cherry Drop, and Diana Supreme. Most of these new drafts made extravagant yet appropriate claims, with some of them almost sounding overqualified for the position! One applicant, Silvia Suzuki, living in Honda Town, even managed to incorporate the names of automobiles into her whole CV, noting that she had studied at Nissan Public School, and sang at both the Skyline Café and the Gloria Club in Tokyo. References were being provided from James Brown who lived on Soultrain Street in New York, and Quincy Jones, a resident of Blue Note Street.

Covering letters and CVs were then collected for final corrections and returned later that day when learners were also asked to revise the CVs for the following day. In addition, before the end of this class, the twenty-four learners were split into eight groups or "selection committees" of three members in preparation for Activity 2 below, and asked to follow the instructions given in Figures 5 and 6, copies of which were distributed to all the class.

Thus each group became a selection committee, and the learners were required to give reasons for preferring one candidate over another. They were encouraged not to limit themselves solely to clause-initial discourse markers such as *Secondly* and *Thirdly* to preface their statements but to make use of the transitions in Figure 3 every time that an opinion was expressed.

The groups were given approximately 15 minutes to select winning résumés, which were then collected. Seven photocopies were made of each résumé. During this period the class were given a writing activity to keep them busy which consisted of writing a rough version of their own résumé and which they would have to finish for homework. Copies of the résumés of the seven short-listed candidates for the position of vocalist were then redistributed to all seven groups, and everyone was given four minutes to note briefly two reasons why each candidate should get the job, and one reason why s/he should not. Again, they were asked to bear in mind the evaluation criteria referred to earlier in Figure 6.

Everyone was asked again to discuss the merits of each candidate, using the hedges, discourse markers and language patterns previously introduced, and to try to decide on a suitable candidate. They were to judge the résumé and letter not just on their (imaginative) informative content, but also on presentation and layout. Because of discussion and disagreement over selection of the most suitable candidate, learners may also be asked to focus on formal or less "aggressive" ways of introducing differing opinions, and also to include discourse markers to signal similarity, contrast or concession. (Footnote 3 below)

After a final 15-minute period of discussion, the class were asked to vote for the best résumé. At this stage, we found that it was not easy to choose one outstanding winner. Yet the point of the whole exercise was not to choose a suitable vocalist, but to introduce the presentational skills and strategies used in writing a résumé, and to review business-letter writing techniques while reinforcing the aspects of language use outlined above.

As a final exercise, given that most of the students would be applying for jobs the following year, everyone was asked to finish writing their own personal résumé, taking note again of their introductory notes on résumé writing. As all learners had access to computers, these résumés were corrected and saved on floppy disks, and thus accessible for revision in the future. Final versions of the CVs may be copied and bound and a copy of each given to all the class so that all of them can peruse their colleagues' work and note the differing presentational and imaginative approaches. The instructor who may be bewildered by the variety of résumé formats in a number of established texts should remember that while many companies have their own formats, the information they ask for is usually similar and may be presented by making few minor alterations to the CV produced in class.

## Conclusions

The final result was a set of personal résumés that were sharply focused, relevant, and which made the most of students' academic backgrounds and other achievements. Learners compared the first and final drafts of their imaginative résumés and took note of the "before and after" differences. Not only had they been asked to consider what a multinational employer would look

for in a résumé, but more importantly perhaps, they had been made aware of the need (as in many writing assignments) to manipulate content appropriately so as to make the best impression. (Japanese learners will be expected to be merely factual when submitting a résumé to a prospective employer, and they are reticent about singing their own praise regarding their achievements). The learners appeared to find the communicative aspects of these activities challenging and enjoyable, and following written assignments also showed a more wide-ranging and consistent use of discourse markers.

Approximately 40 minutes of class time over a three week period were devoted exclusively to these activities. While this writing activity may appear to be rather time-consuming, the usual textbook approach rarely goes beyond merely illustrating basic curriculum vitae headings, and often neglects to reinforce or enhance other skills which may be usefully used to complement such presentational processes. Popular software packages may also come with résumé templates, yet writing is not just a product but a process where skills should not just be presented in isolation as "writing skills," but as an integral aspect of the target language.

Some may suggest that a writing class is not the place for conversation, yet many of the more formal transitional elements present in written language lend a fluid elegance to spoken English which is missing in the speech of many EFL/ESL learners. The appropriate use of relatively simple lexical items such as these can endow the learner with a more native-like grasp of the language. Some learners perceive transitional devices to be part of a more formal code of communication, a set of lexical structures to be used in writing and observed in reading, and rarely to be used in speech. They recognise their function in signalling and linking a certain relationship and interplay of ideas and information, yet usually avoid oral production of these in class. Speaking complements writing; if the learner has little practice in using transitional elements orally, it is unlikely that these will be used spontaneously in writing.

In a context which provides a challenge to the imagination and sense of fun for both the learner and the instructor, the aim of this writing activity is thus twofold: to inspire the learner, should they need to *Write* a résumé, to apply the *Right* rhetorical formats when applying *for a Job* ; and to enhance awareness of how to manipulate presentational skills.

As noted earlier, most of these items are understood by Japanese college language learners yet rarely used in daily conversation. The same applies to the use of discourse markers in both their speech and their writing. These examples are adapted from McKernan.

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### Footnote 1

1. A variety of résumé formats may be consulted in the following texts: Brown and Hood (1989) (Unit 11), Cummings and Genzel (1989) (Chapter 3), Jolly (1987) (Unit 6), and McKernan (1991) (Part 4:14) or in Horner et al., (1994) (Section 35C). Jones and Alexander (1989) (Unit 13) also suggest information that may be included in a CV.

### Footnote 3

3. This selection is adapted from Jones (1985 Unit 8) who provides useful examples of language use in presenting opinions.